THE BLESSED DAMOZEL



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THE BLESSED DAMOZEL

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By D. G. Rossetti

Introduction

BLESSED

By W. M. Rossetti

Decorations

DAMOZEL

By W. B. Macdougall



London
Duckworth & Co.

Boston L. C. Page & Company, Inc. 1898

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ANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI, born on 12th May 1828, wrote The Blessed Damozel in the nineteenth year of his age, or before 12th May 1847. The pen or the partiality of a brother is not needed for saying that the poem, if considered simply from the poetical point of view, ranks as highly remarkable among the works of very juvenile writers; and still more so when we take into account its total unlikeness to any other poem then extant. I at least know of nothing which presents any similar combination of mediæval devoutness, human passion, and remote yet intimate idealism—an earthly love wearing a spiritual halo so bright and dazzling that the eye hardly distinguishes the point of juncture between the one and the other. In old art I am cognizant of no precedent, and in the art contemporary with Rossetti's adolescence none. So much be it permitted me to say on the question of personal initiative, or what we call originality.

I can remember in a general way the time when my brother wrote The Blessed Damozel, but could not myself have fixed the date as being before the completion of his nineteenth year. He himself fixed it, in a letter to Mr Hall Caine (1880 or 1881) which that gentleman has published: "Jenny (in a first form) was written almost as early as The Blessed Damozel, which I wrote—and have altered little since—when I was eighteen." Mr Caine has also quoted a statement made to him verbally by Rossetti in the autumn of 1881, in connexion with Edgar Poe's Raven.

"He remarked that, out of his love of it while still a boy, his own Blessed Damozel originated. 'I saw,' he said, 'that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth; and so I determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven." The term here, "while still a boy," should be understood with a certain reservation. The Raven was first published in America on 29th January 1845, and Rossetti had probably entered upon his eighteenth year before he saw it. I can still recollect his bringing home some cheap English magazine containing a reprint of the poem, and the zest with which, having already perused it, he re-read it over and over again to the family.

A letter from Dante Rossetti to his mother, 20th May 1873. has been published, in which he says: "I remember that for the family Hotchpotch, long and long ago, I first wrote The Blessed Damozel, and also a poem about a portrait. Have you these ancient documents, and could you let me have the same if in my own handwriting? Not, however, if you set store by them. What is the date thereof?" This so-called Hotchpotch, or Weekly Efforts, was a sort of family magazine concocted in our household; but it seems to have come to an end at a date, 1843, much earlier than that of The Blessed Damozel. There was some *later* performance of the same kind, not yet wholly cancelled from my memory, and that must in reality have been the recipient of the Damozel and The Portrait. Whether the original manuscript was traced in consequence of the letter here quoted from, and whether it came into my brother's hands, I am unable to say: it has not come into mine-more's the pity.

These two statements—the one made by Mr Caine, and the other in Rossetti's letter—appear to be all that can at present be said with any certainty as to the date and genesis of *The Blessed Damozel*. It may safely be assumed that, as soon as

my brother had done it, he knew that he had produced a good thing, and some few other people knew the same: the work must have confirmed his internal consciousness that he was born a poet. The Blessed Damozel had been preceded by some of his able translations from the Italian and German, and by various original verses absolutely or comparatively weak. It was nearly contemporary, not only with The Portrait just mentioned and the first beginning of Jenny, but also with My Sister's Sleep, Ave, parts of Dante at Verona, of A Last Confession, and of The Bride's Prelude, and the sonnets Retro me Sathana and The Choice.

The Blessed Damozel was one of the poems which Dante Rossetti sent, about December 1847, to Mr William Bell Scott, then Master of the Government School of Design in Newcastleon-Tyne. My brother did not as yet know Scott personally; but, being a great admirer of some of his poems, and not ignorant of his work as an artist, he had entered into correspondence with him, and now sent some of his own productions for consideration. Scott, in his Autobiographical Notes, records: "What was my wonder and perplexity when I found The Blessed Damozel, My Sister's Sleep, and other admirable poems, marshalled under the title of Songs of the Art Catholic!" This expression "admirable poems" may, by the way, be contrasted with Mr Scott's statement, elsewhere in the same book, that the mass of Rossetti's earlier poems, except Jenny and Sister Helen, are "comparatively boyish and worthless." The general title thus adopted by my brother in 1847, Songs of the Art Catholic, is one that he never put into print. It has a juvenile twang, yet is not without its significance. One can perceive that by the word "Art" he meant, not simply and solely poetic art, but a certain association with the tone of pictorial art of the olden days, the days when that art had none other than a Catholic ideal. Not that Rossetti was himself a Catholic, Roman or other; but he felt the potency

Allegation Jnfroduction

of the Catholic spirit in all art, and the kinship of its inspirations to those which were simmering in his own mind.

Towards the end of February 1848, Rossetti addressed another literary man not personally known to him, Leigh Hunt, soliciting an opinion upon some of his poems, including *The Blessed Damozel*. Hunt replied in remarkably kind and encouraging terms, referring to Rossetti's "Dantesque heavens, without any hell to spoil them." This certainly applies to *The Blessed Damozel*; and my brother, in a family letter which has been published, speaks of the poem as being "written in a kind of Gothic manner, which I suppose he is pleased to think belongs to the school of Dante."

The foregoing details may be of not much moment in themselves; but, taken together, they are of some weight as showing how far advanced Rossetti was, long before the "Præraphaelite Brotherhood" existed, towards that state of feeling which produced the Brotherhood, and before he had become associated with Millais or Holman Hunt, or even (the earliest of the three, for practical purposes) Madox Brown. He wrote *The Blessed Damozel* early in 1847 (if not indeed in 1846), and the Præraphaelite Brotherhood was not founded until September 1848. He wrote it "in a kind of Gothic manner," and included it with other poems under the general title *Songs of the Art Catholic*.

Of the first form of the composition, that which appeared in the family magazine towards 1847, no trace remains, so far as my knowledge extends. The second form is that which was printed in *The Germ*, and which constitutes our present reprint. To this, therefore, I shall now address myself.

Before publishing the poem in *The Germ*, my brother added four stanzas to it. I cannot say with any precision which they were; but I think it not unlikely that they may have been stanzas 6, 9, 13, and either 14 or 17—beginning respectively, "It lies from Heaven across the flood—And still she bowed her-

self, and stooped—We two will stand beside that shrine—We two will lie i' the shadow of "—and "Alas, and though the end were reached." The poem was inserted in No. 2 of *The Germ*, February 1850. Not many people read it there; but those who did were, I think, unanimous in pronouncing it a very uncommon and a beautiful performance.

The subsequent publications of The Blessed Damozel were in The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, 1856, and in the volume Poems, 1870. In each of these instances some changes were introduced; and even since 1870 the composition, in later re-issues of the Poems, remained not absolutely unaltered. I will here name all those alterations of The Germ version which appear to me worth specifying on the present occasion. Along with these, some few others are notified in the elaborate work which Mr William Sharp brought out in 1882, Dante Gabriel Rossetti; a Record and a Study. Such other slight changes as he mentions may count as mere details of diction or metre. Rossetti had, from a very early age, a noticeably rich poetic diction, and a fine sense of metre; but the first was blemished by some youthful mannerisms, and the second did not invariably avoid "quips and cranks" of accentuation, more conformable to Italian than to English prosody. This is what he neatly called (in a letter of 1869) "the impossible intonation of that early epoch."

Stanza 1-

"Her blue grave eyes were deeper much Than a deep water, even"—

was changed, in The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, into

"Her eyes knew more of rest and shade Than waters stilled at even";

and now stands,

"Her eyes were deeper than the depth Of waters stilled at even."

Stanza 7, "But in those tracts," etc., is now entirely omitted. Stanza 8 was altered slightly in The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, and again in the Poems of 1870; but until this latter date inclusive the notion of "games" continued to figure. There is certainly something very funny about the idea of souls in heaven "playing at holy games" (the "holy" disappeared in 1870); as if any such game as battledore and shuttlecock could become any the holier by being played on the margin of the sea of glass mingled with fire, or chess would be hallowed by altering the names of the pieces, all except the bishops. Soon after 1870 the "games" were dropped, and "lovers newly met" were very advantageously substituted; and now (after some other minor yet not uninteresting changes) the lines stand—

"Around her, lovers, newly met

'Mid deathless love's acclaims,

Spoke evermore among themselves

Their heart-remembered names."

Stanza 9. "Calm" and "warm" make a "cockney rhyme." In The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine the lines were modified thus—

"And still she bowed above the vast
Waste sea of worlds that swam,
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she leaned on warm."

The cockneyism, though shuffled, was not thus corrected. In 1870 came—

"And still she bowed herself, and stooped
Out of the circling charm,
Until" etc.;

and "warm" thus obtained at last a proper rhyme.

Stanzas 10 and 11, the latter beginning "I wish that he were come to me." Between these two stanzas, a stanza (for which there is no sort of equivalent in *The Germ*) was introduced in 1856. It contains the phrase (which many readers of the poem will remember)—

"The curled moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf."

In the *Poems* of 1870 a second stanza also is interpolated here; and it figured, but somewhat further on, in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* as well. It constitutes one of the lover's parenthetical speeches, beginning:—

"Ah sweet! Even now in that bird's song,"

and ending (in the magazine):-

"Down all the trembling stair."

In the volume form, "echoing" has replaced "trembling."
Stanza 11.

"Have I not prayed in solemn heaven?
On earth, has he not prayed?"

In the volume of *Poems* these lines are altered thus:—

"Have I not prayed in heaven? on earth, Lord, Lord, has he not prayed?"

I scarcely know which phrase is preferable. Perhaps Rossetti considered that the epithet "solemn" had a mannered tone, for he

cancelled it both from this stanza, and also from stanza 21, "the unnumbered solemn heads," which now stands (but I much question whether it is for the better) "the clear-ranged unnumbered heads."

Stanza 13.

"Whose lamps tremble continually
With prayer sent up to God;
And where each need, revealed, expects
Its patient period."

In the Poems:—

"Whose lamps are stirred continually
With prayer sent up to God;
And see our old prayers, granted, melt
Each like a little cloud."

As to this I will only say that the original lines appear to me so good that it needed some hardihood in their author to alter them. The image of the "little cloud" counts for something; but it makes a considerable flaw in the rhyming.

Stanzas 16, 17.

These two parenthetical stanzas, spoken by the lover, are highly noticeable. The first of them appears to me beautiful and most effective—the phrase "Alas for lonely heaven!" being one of the most moving audacities in the poem. The 17th stanza (which in The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine was printed as the 11th) is less telling in expression and rhythm, but it introduced an important point, where the lover says of himself:—

"May the close lips that knew not prayer Praise ever though they would?"

This indicates past undevoutness in the lover, or perhaps even a certain degree of unbelief. Rossetti must eventually have con-

sidered it better to exclude any such idea; and for these two stanzas he substituted in 1870 only one stanza—

"Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st!
Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
Was but its love for thee?"

Stanza 19: "And bosoms coverèd" has been altered into "And foreheads garlanded."

Stanza 22. The last four lines ("To have more blessing," etc.), are somewhat stiff in phrase and sound. In The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine they were changed to—

"Only to live as once on earth
At peace,—only to be
As then we were—being as then
Together, I and he."

These lines have since been retained—only that "at peace" has given way to "with love," a clear improvement.

Stanza 23, "Yea verily when he is come," has been omitted in the volume form.

From these remarks it will be perceived that, in the general conception—the informing spirit and treatment—of The Blessed Damozel, no change whatever was made; if only we except that detail (stanza 17) which implied, or might be construed as implying, a certain sceptical tendency in the lover, a germ of disunion between himself and his beloved in matters of faith. The poem which appeared to Dante Rossetti good enough for the family magazine in 1847 or '46 continued up to his death in 1882 to appear to him good enough to stand in the forefront

of his published work; heedfully revised indeed on more than one occasion, but not transmuted.

My illustrious friend Mr Swinburne wrote to me some while ago that a better service to the memory of my brother as a poet could hardly be rendered than to print the variants in the successive published forms of his several poems; for (as he said), while the changes introduced were almost invariably for the better, the older readings were often, from the point of view which had prompted them, so felicitous that few persons except Dante Rossetti (with his insatiable passion for the best) would have had the heart to sacrifice them. I assent to this judgment of the most competent judge living in our country, very great as a critic, if far greater still as a poet; and I think the present edition of the first printed form of *The Blessed Damozel*, and the remarks which are here made to bring out its details, will confirm Mr Swinburne's opinion.

My brother twice painted *The Blessed Damozel* as an oilpicture, life-sized. The first instance was for Mr William Graham, than whom he had no more sympathetic commissioning friend. Mr Graham himself suggested the subject, and found that Rossetti had already contemplated painting it. The work was in hand from 1873 to 1877, and contained in the background several groups of the

"lovers newly met 'Mid deathless love's acclaims,"

all of them in blue drapery. Afterwards, 1879, he painted a second picture of the subject for Mr F. R. Leyland, also a hearty and loving admirer of his work. The two pictures, though partially similar, are far from identical in treatment: the second one does not contain any of the background groups. There was also a crayon head of the Damozel for Mr Leyland in 1872, and another for Lord Mount-Temple in 1874; and (if I am not

mistaken) a third for Mr L. R. Valpy towards the latter date. I am unable to say from recollection whether any or which of these heads resembled the heads of the Damozel in the oilpictures: the head that is reproduced in the present volume is wholly different from those in the paintings, though studied from the same model. This was Miss Alexa Wilding, one of Rossetti's frequent and highly valued models for heads.

In 1895 Mr Byam Shaw exhibited at the Royal Academy a picture from *The Blessed Damozel*, bearing the motto,

"We two, she said, will seek the groves Where the Lady Mary is."

It is a work of skill and ability, but did not appear to me to be in the same key as the poem—a key in which sentiment and beauty, along with the tone of mediævalism, are prime and indispensable qualities. A much less successful attempt—I think, indeed, a distinctly unsuccessful one—had been made in 1886 by an American artist, Mr Kenyon Cox, who published in New York a sumptuous volume of photographed designs, along with the poem. Here I discern not much authentic sentiment or beauty, and no mediævalism at all. The form of presentment is rather classic than mediæval, and even the classic does not count in it for so much as the life-academy. The designs, however, are those of a very well-qualified and proficient artist; and on their own showing —though not as being analogous to Rossetti's poem—they deserve no small amount of praise. There may be some other artistic illustrations of The Blessed Damozel; but either I have no knowledge of them, or else at the time of my writing they do not recur to my memory.

The present is the first British reprint of the poem as it stood in *The Germ*. There was, however, an earlier and private reprint in America. It bears the imprint—"Twenty-five copies privately

printed for C. L. Williams at the De Vinne Press, MDCCCXCIV." Mr Clarence L. Williams, the gentleman who undertook this reprint, favoured me with a copy. It includes a sonnet, "D.G.R.," written by Mr Edmund Gosse in 1871.

The Blessed Damozel has often been used for the purpose of public recitations, and I believe that not long ago it was set to music, and performed in public. Of this, however, I cannot speak

with certainty.

As to published translations, I know of two in particular, but must no doubt from time to time have seen some others. There is a French translation by Gabriel Sarrazin, La Damoiselle Bénie, included in his volume Poètes Modernes de l'Angleterre, 1885. It is only a little abridged, two or three stanzas being omitted. This translation, following the French practice of several years past, is in choice prose, and is a good one. An Italian translation is La Fanciulla Beata, by Ettore Ciccotti, 1893. It was delivered as illustrating a discourse upon Rossetti, in which some remarks of Max Nordau were contested; for this learned author, in his book on Degeneration, has dissected the Damozel with a scalpel unsparingly, and I conceive not always judiciously, applied. Signor Ciccotti's rendering is in verse, but not the same metre as the original: it seems to me to be a moderate success, not wholly exempt from misunderstandings of the English text. I know another Italian translator of certain poems by Rossetti (Sister Helen, Staff and Scrip, &c.) who, were he to undertake The Blessed Damozel, might be expected to prove both more literal and more literary than Signor Ciccotti-indeed, remarkable as entering into the finer shades of meaning in the original. This is my son-in-law, Signor Antonio Agresti of Florence, whose other translations show great skill and success. They are not unlikely to be published pretty soon in Florence.

It would be easy to cite eulogistic verdicts on The Blessed

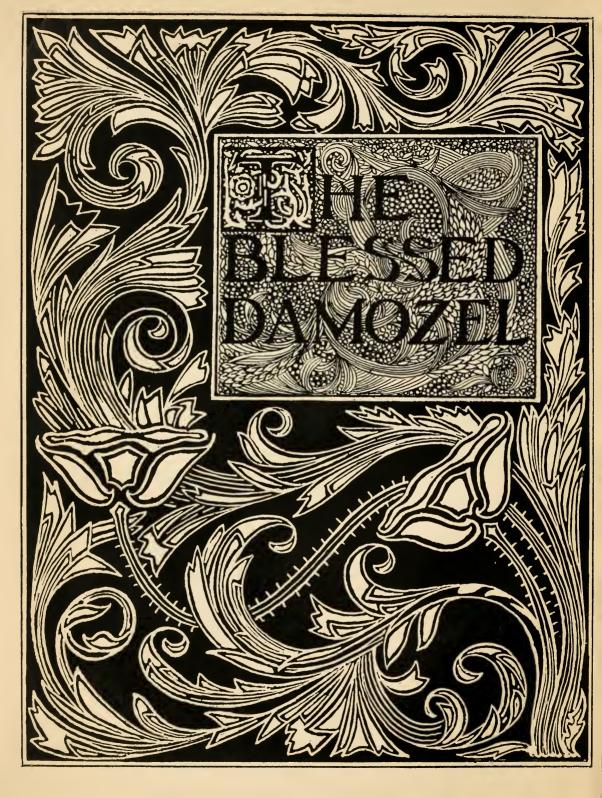
Damozel, delivered by William Morris and some others of the men best entitled to pronounce. I will, however, not enter upon this line of comment: and in fact The Blessed Damozel has never wanted for fervent admirers among poetic readers. There are some persons who look with aversion upon Dante Rossetti and all his doings: but, if we go outside this circle, into that other circle where he is valued at all, we find that for few of his performances is he more valued than for The Blessed Damozel. It was the brightest jewel in the circlet of his youth; and none that he added in his prime has bedimmed its lustre, or (to use a more colloquial expression) has "taken the shine out of it."

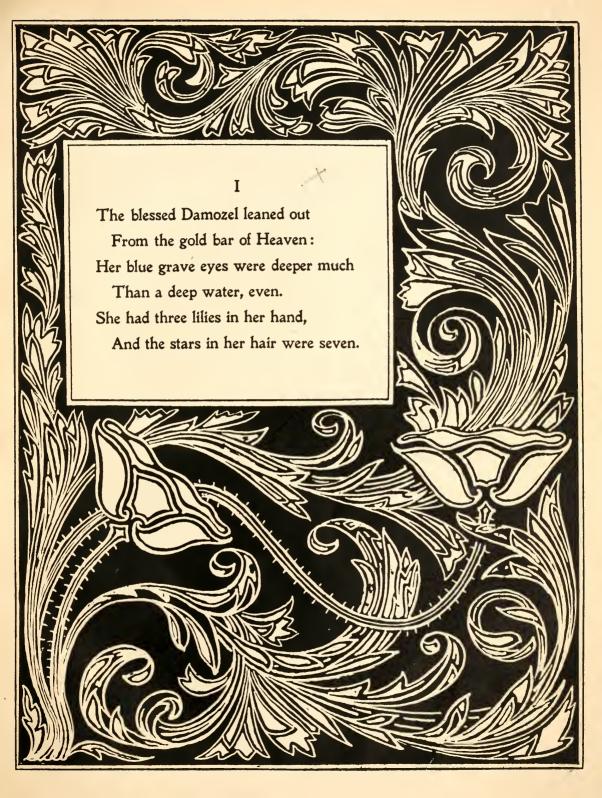
W. M. ROSSETTI.

London, February 1898.







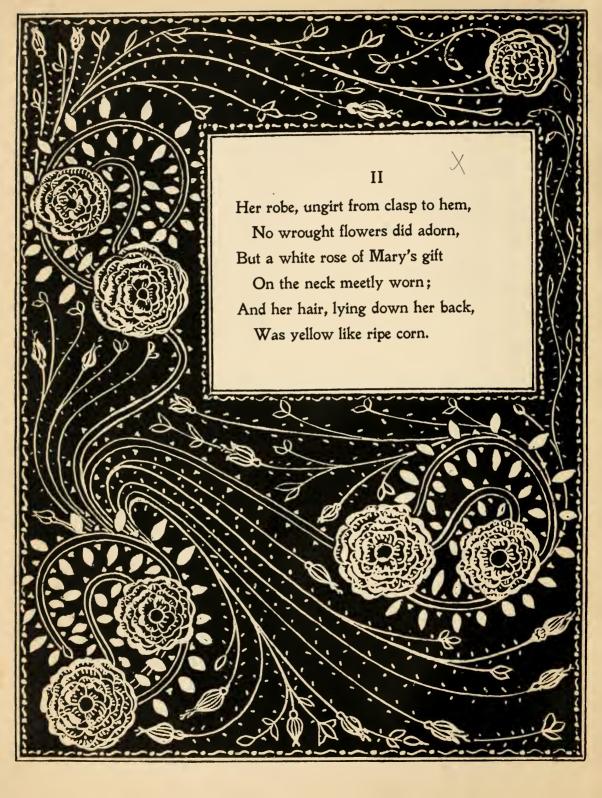


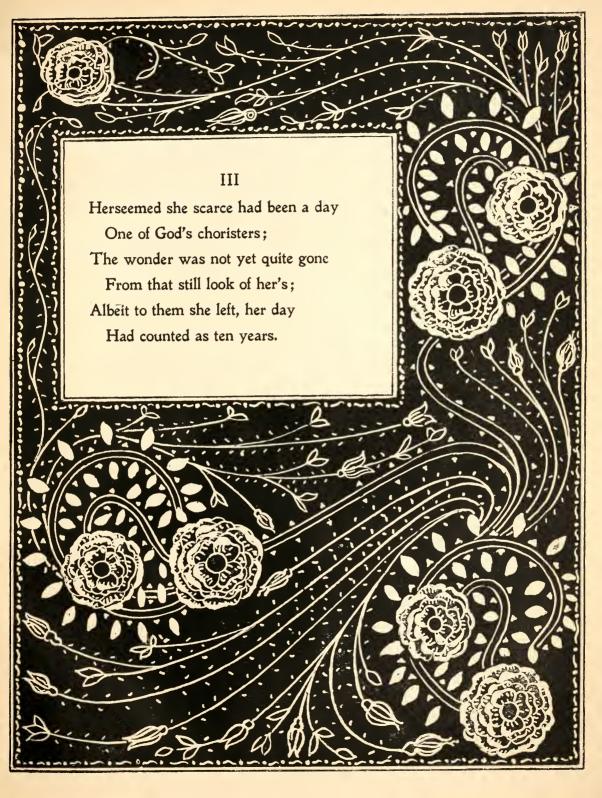
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THE
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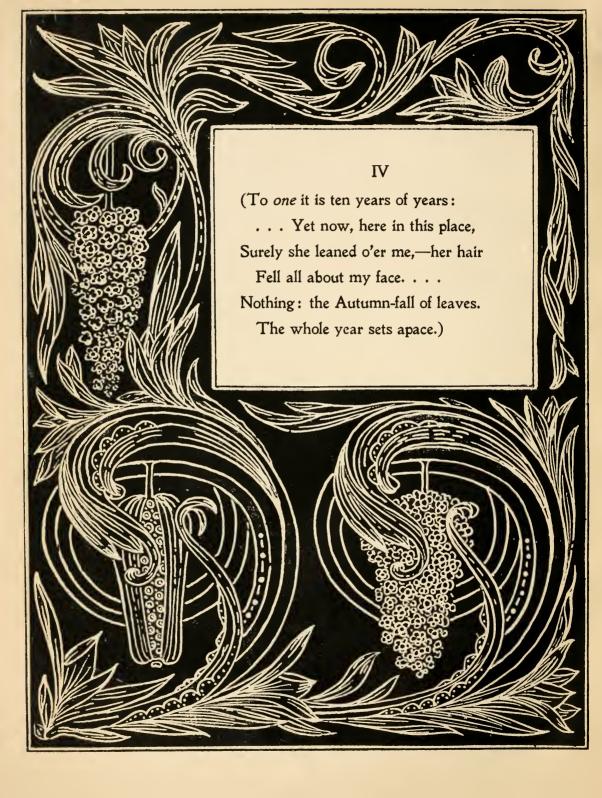
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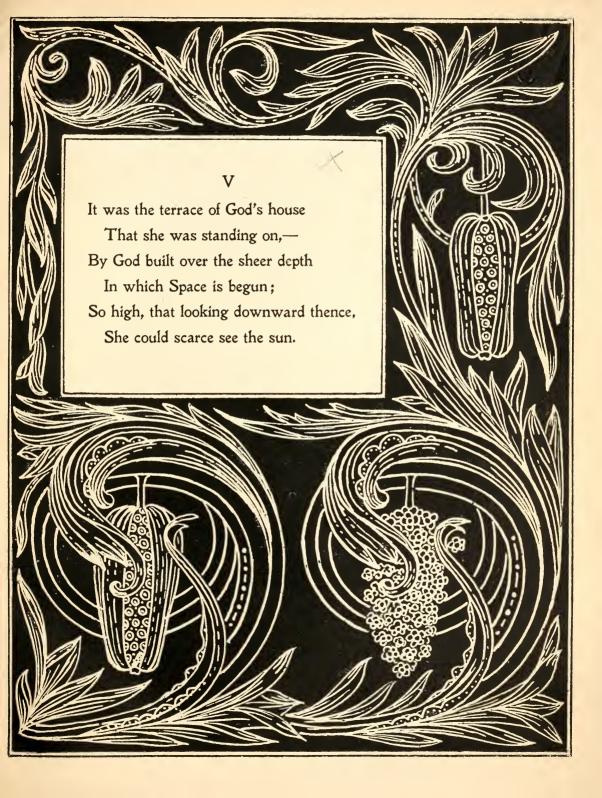
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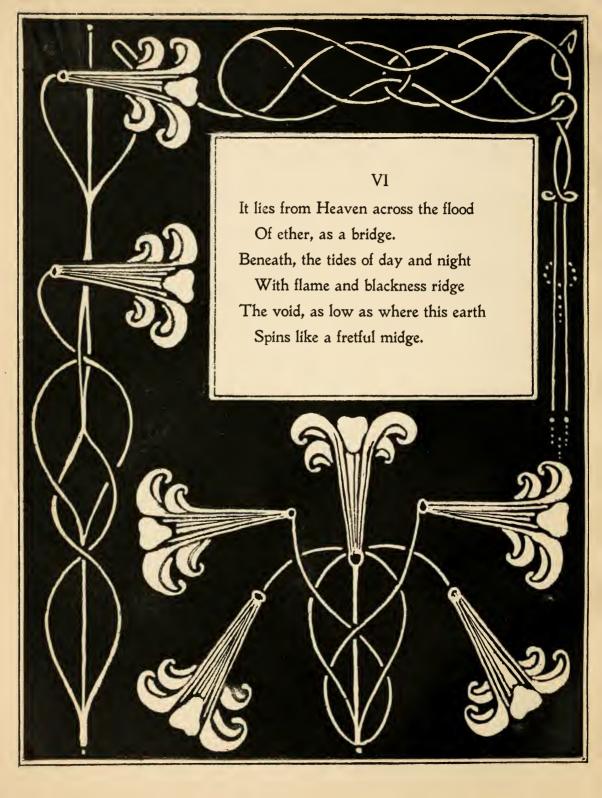


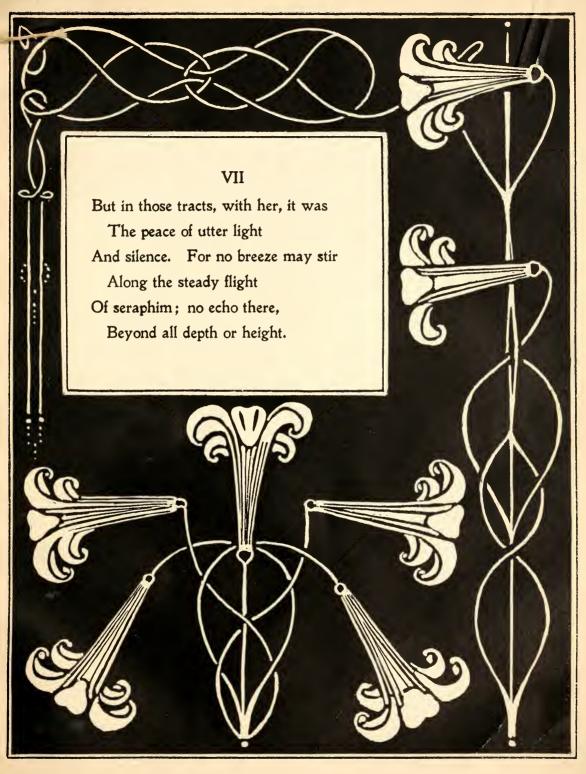
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THE SIXTH VERSE

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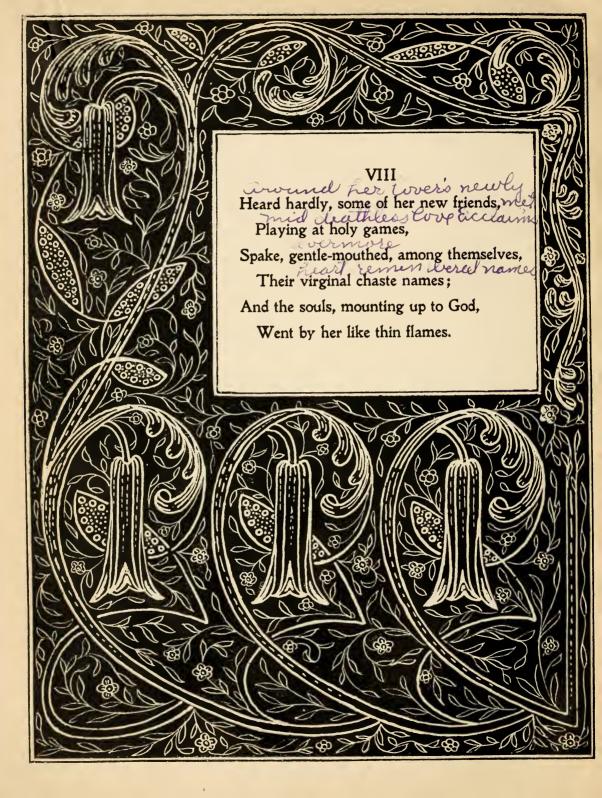


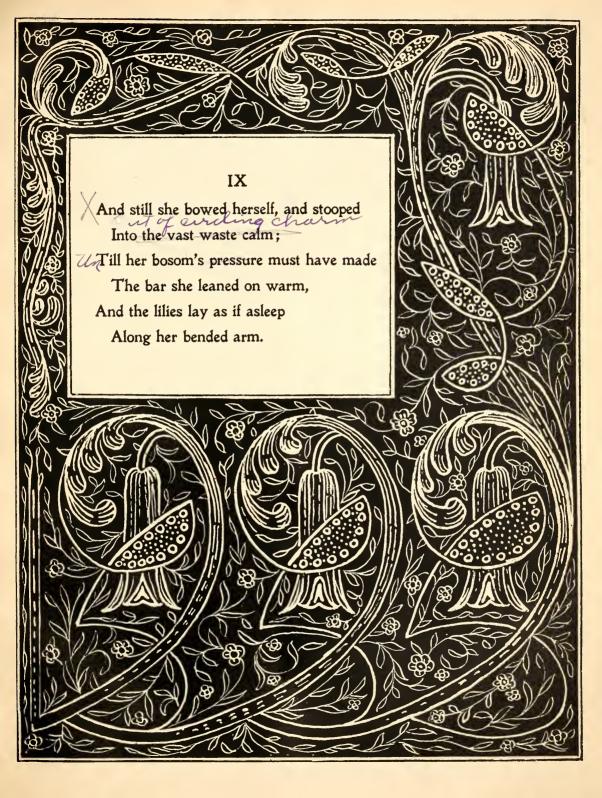
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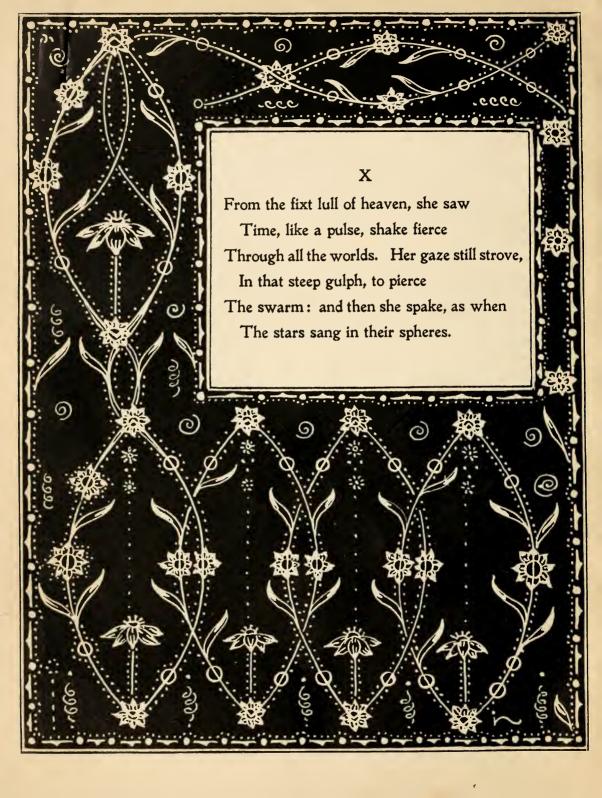


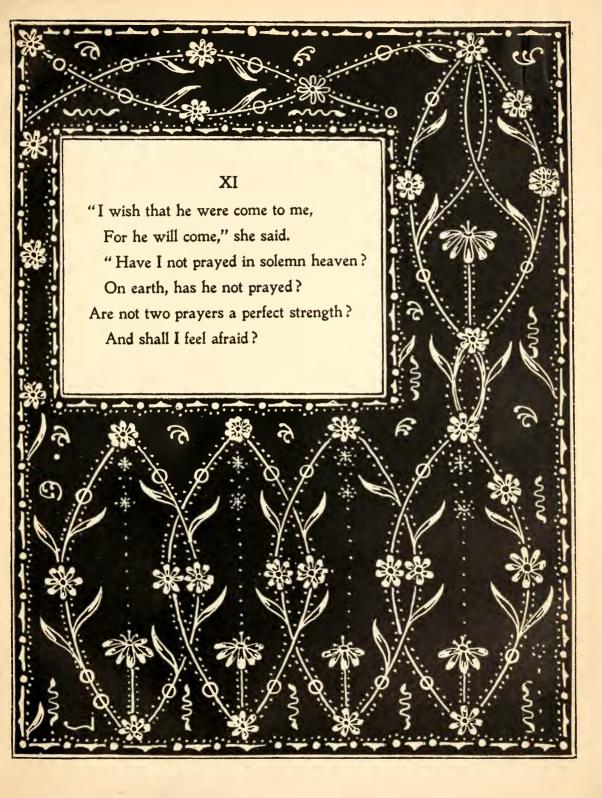
THE NINTH VERSE

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THE TENTH VERSE

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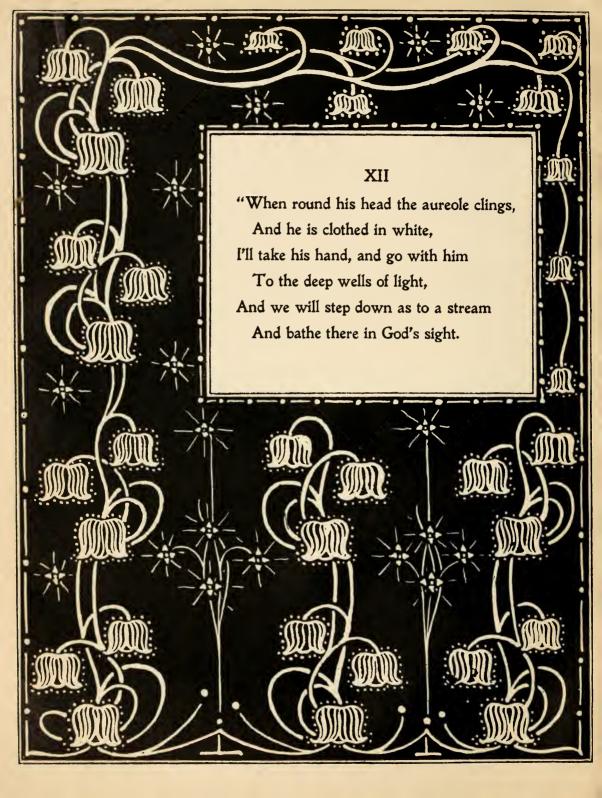


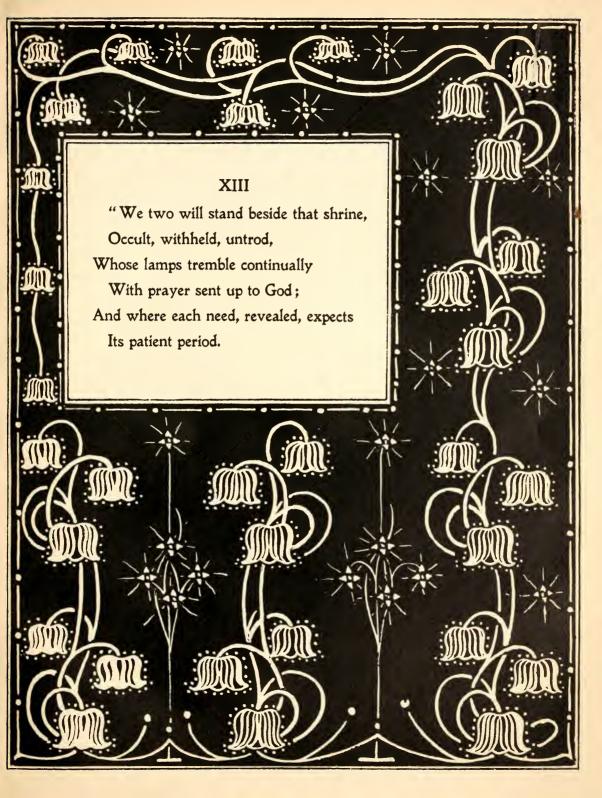
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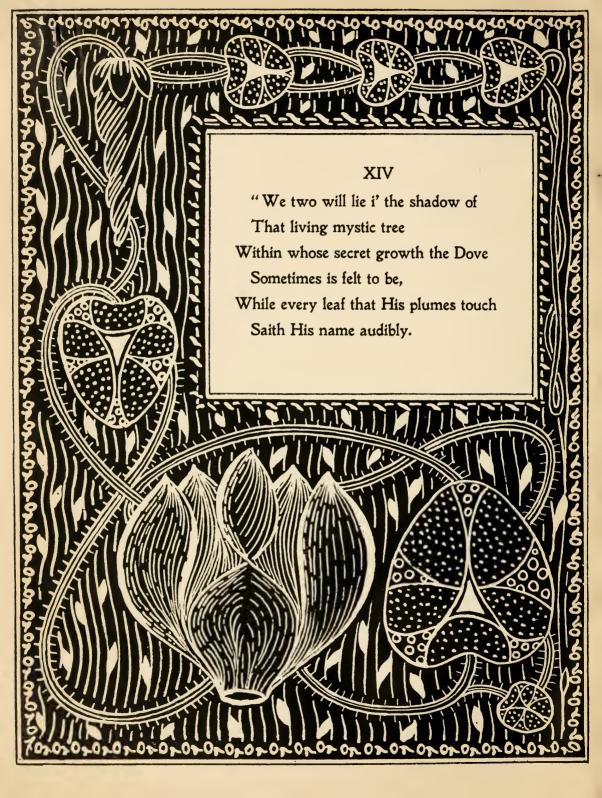
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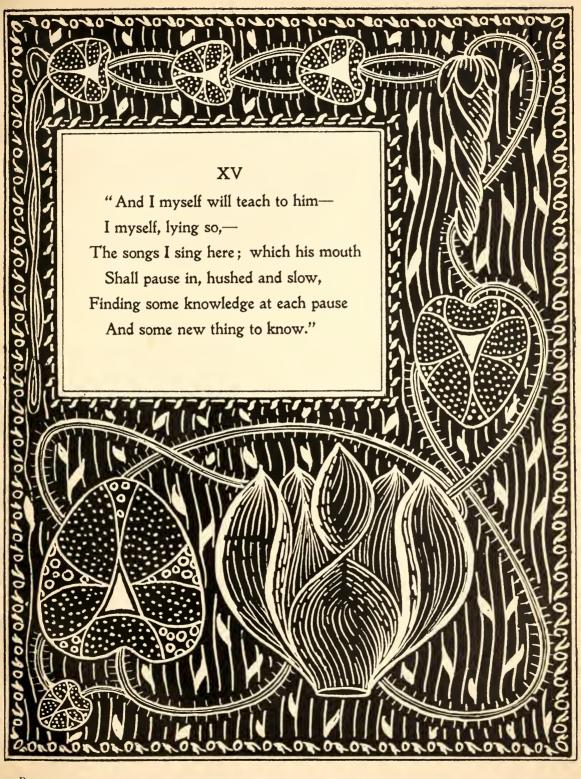
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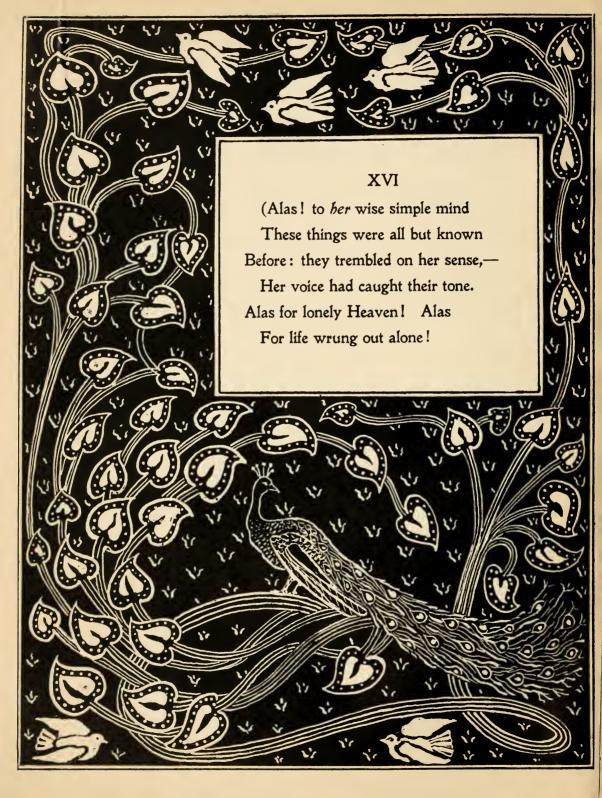


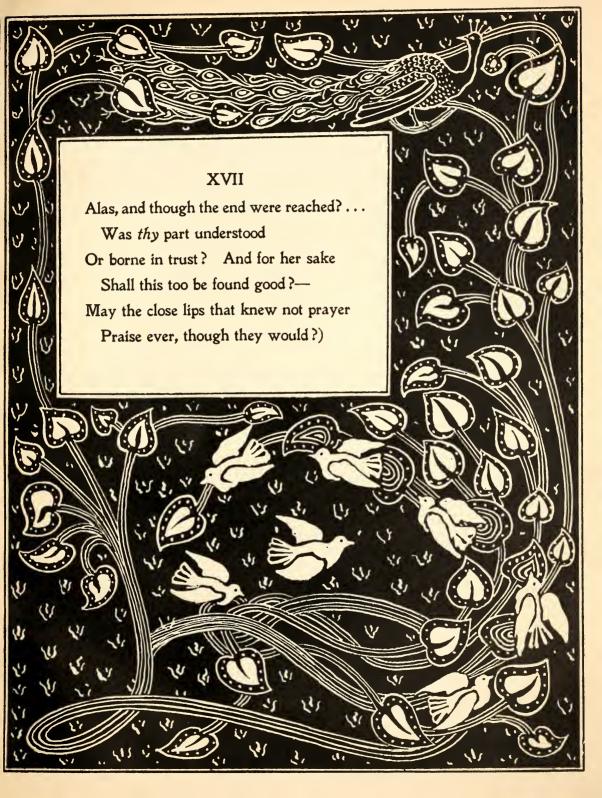
THE FIFTEENTH VERSE



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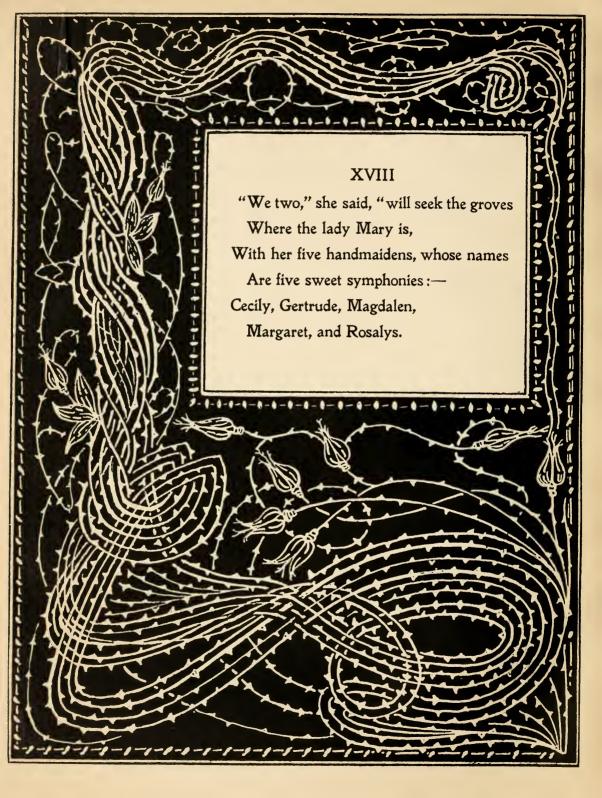
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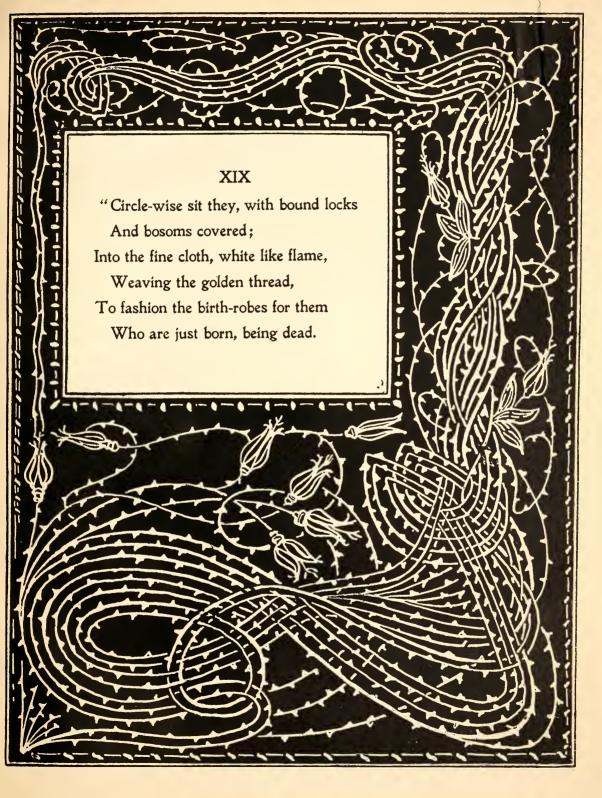
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THE EIGHTEENTH VERSE





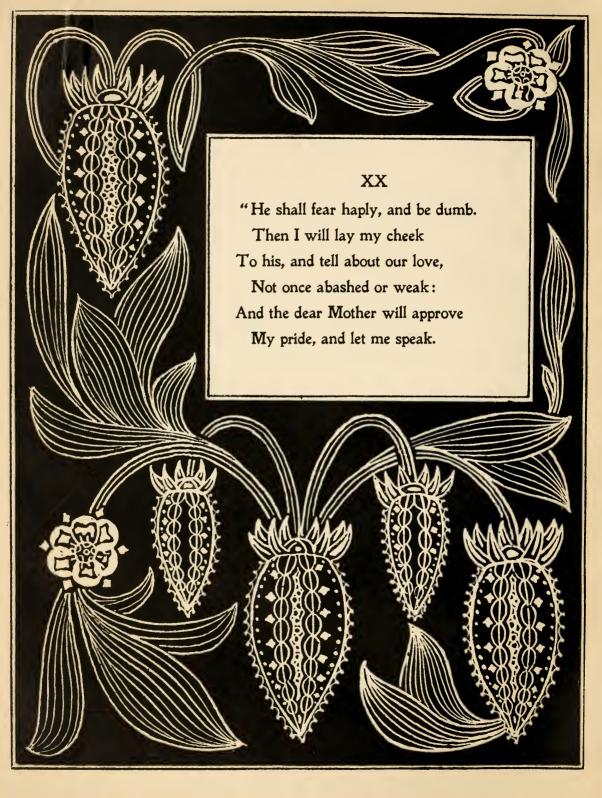


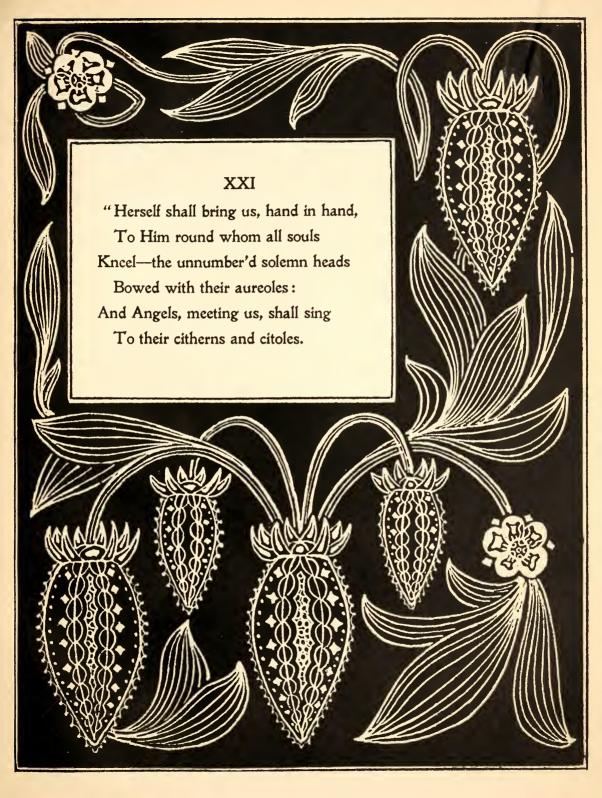
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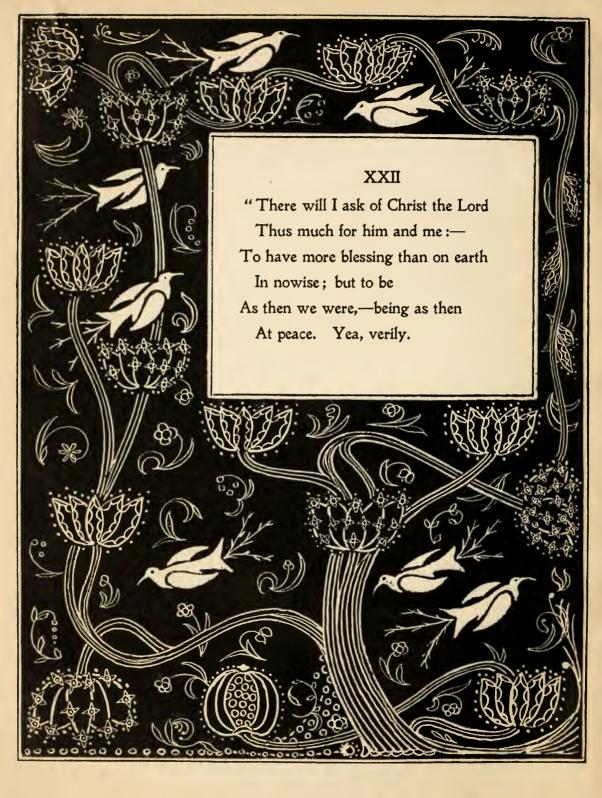


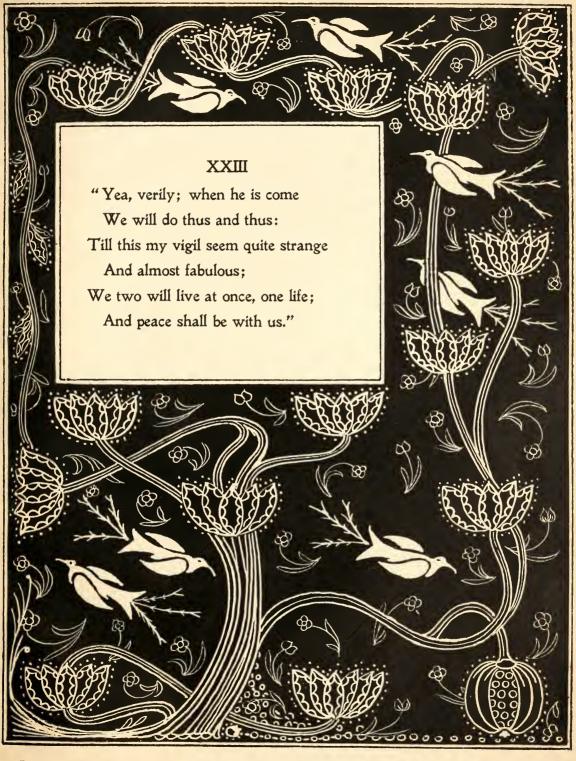
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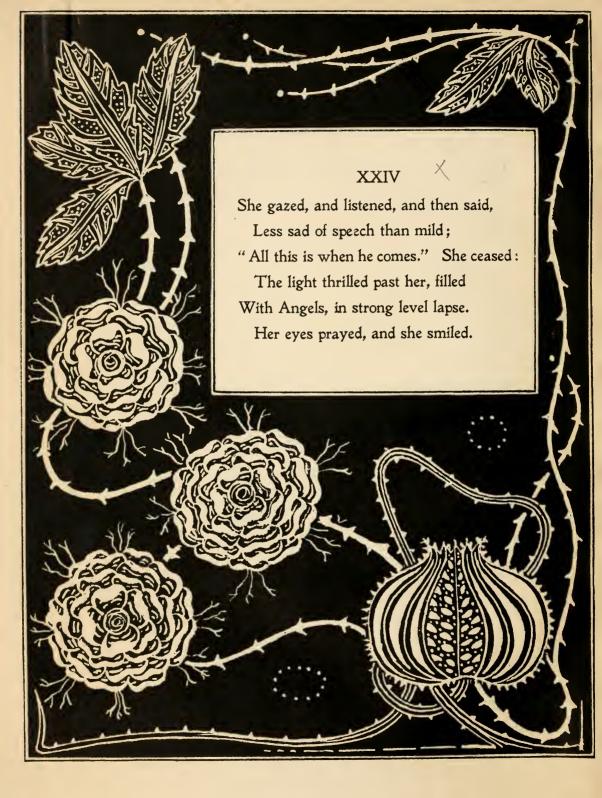


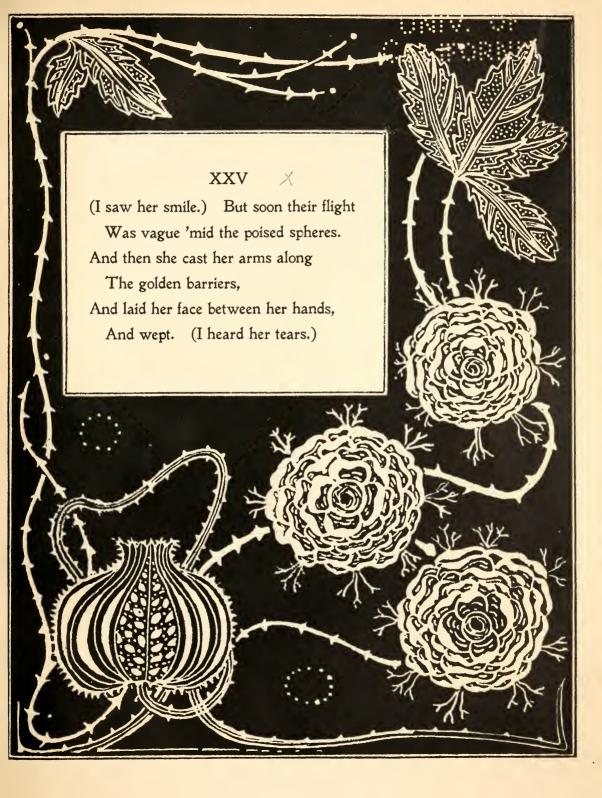
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